

While I appreciate President Obama's attention to the oil spill tragedy in the Gulf, the residents along the coast are still seeking real solutions and action at this critical time.

Like many North Floridians, I am impatient for both BP and the administration to take more meaningful and aggressive action to do whatever it takes to stop the flow of oil into the Gulf.

That has to be job No. 1 so that attention can then be focused on cleaning up the Gulf and assisting the many residents, fishermen and small businesses that are suffering economically due to this catastrophe.

While these critical tasks are taking place, we also must be thinking ahead and taking proactive steps to safeguard our region from any threat that could impede these efforts, such as a tropical storm or hurricane.

If a tropical storm or a hurricane were to strike the Gulf now with millions of gallons of oil, its impact on our region could be disastrous: booms would be compromised; oil under the surface could be brought up; vessels of opportunity would have to be moved; ongoing clean-up efforts would be forced to cease; and oil could be carried inland for miles, contaminating roads, homes, schools and businesses.

We must learn from BP's mistakes and take proactive action now to ensure that North Florida is fully prepared to respond to this threat.

Last week, I held the Joint Oil Spill-Hurricane Planning Conference in Bay County to develop a comprehensive, federal hurricane preparedness and recovery plan for North Florida. Representatives from federal and state emergency response agencies, military leaders, and key local stakeholders discussed the threats posed to our area by having oil propelled inland by a hurricane.

We identified several key areas that require better planning and actions that must be undertaken to brace for the effects a storm could have.

First, to ensure that federal agencies can best support and contribute to local and state response efforts, the existing command and control structure needs to be further revised. Federal response agencies need to work within the command structure already established by the Florida Division of Emergency Management and our counties' Emergency Operations Centers. This would allow federal efforts to seamlessly fit into our state and local chain of command.

Second, we must enhance our ability to quickly and accurately determine the level of oil contamination following a storm, particularly on our local fisheries and environment.

Reliable scientific information will be critical to effectively mobilize emergency responders and clean-up efforts. Florida's 15 state universities and colleges have come together and established the Oil Spill Academic Task Force, a consortium of scientists and scholars that should be employed to quickly and efficiently aid with this important task.

Lastly, in the immediate aftermath of a storm, the public will rightfully have many questions about the availability of basic government services. Ensuring the prompt and efficient dissemination of information — such as the accessibility of roads, the status of local water supplies, the location of contaminated areas, whether fisheries are opened or closed and whether hotels and other tourism facilities are operating — will be vital to coordinating when residents can return to their homes, places of employment and way of life.

I will be taking these recommendations — along with the other proposals developed at the conference — and follow up with the appropriate agencies.

I will also deliver these recommendations to the president and ask him to incorporate these ideas into a comprehensive federal hurricane preparedness and response plan so that our communities and people can be better protected from this unique threat.

At the same time, I will remind the president that BP's failure to develop a responsible contingency plan has endangered the livelihoods of many hardworking men and women on our coasts and that we simply cannot and must not make the same mistake.

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